

## THE CHRISTIAN VOICE IN UKRAINIAN ELECTIONS

by Michael Bourdeaux

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In early November last year the staff of Viktor Yushchenko, soon to be installed as Ukraine's new president, found a stock of some 10,000 unsigned leaflets in an Orthodox church calling him "a partisan of the schismatics and an enemy of Orthodoxy" and his American-born wife, Kateryna Chumachenko, a "CIA agent". These were on the premises of the Holy Assumption Church in Bilhorod-Dnistrovsky, an undeveloped rural region in south-western Ukraine, adjacent to the independent state of Moldova. Further copies were distributed in the more populous regions around Odessa.

This was the worst, but by no means the only, instance of a church-based scurrilous campaign against the eventual winner of the recent elections. In Kiev itself on November 11 Orthodox priests led a procession of some 2,000 people between Ukraine's two most ancient Christian sites, the Monastery of the Caves and St Sofia's Cathedral, carrying not only icons, but also political banners proclaiming anti-NATO and anti-American slogans. This was a strong visual component in TV's anti-Yushchenko campaign before the falsified election in which his rival, Viktor Yanukovych, would prematurely claim victory.

So did the Orthodox Church take a united stand against the man who has now been elected and who is reportedly a member of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (as is his wife)? The answer is no.

There is schism among Ukrainian Orthodox, with three separate jurisdictions within the same territory. Before independence in 1991, the Moscow Patriarchate stood alone in Ukraine, dominating church life there as surely as the Kremlin and communism ruled the political sphere. Just before this, Moscow had suffered a

devastating blow: the re-legalisation, during Mikhail Gorbachev's last days, of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church in the West, that part of Ukraine which had not been under Soviet control until the westward march of the Red Army in World War II. In 1946 Stalin's henchmen liquidated the church of the people there, once designated as 'Uniate' – a church which celebrated the liturgy according to the Orthodox model, had a married priesthood (though celibate bishops), but was also fiercely loyal to the Vatican. Moreover, it contained a nucleus of Ukrainian nationalism. Stalin believed that by forcing the Greek Catholics to become Orthodox and imprisoning all the bishops, he could force the people in his new territories to transfer their loyalty to Moscow. Although some of the clergy, fearing for the lives of their families, yielded, Stalin had buried a time bomb, which ticked away for forty years until Gorbachev's policies opened the way for the old wrongs to be righted.

The relations between Russia and Ukraine are infinitely complex and go back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Medieval Russia emerged on the territory of what is now central Ukraine. Kiev, a pagan city-state, grew up at the convergence of two great trade routes, south-north (Byzantium to the Baltic) and east-west (an extension of the Silk Road leading into the far reaches of Asia). In 988AD Kiev embraced the Orthodox Church, taking its faith from Constantinople, an event which would indelibly mark Russian civilisation for all time. It was called 'Kievan Rus' (pronounced 'Roos', a Greek word for 'fair-haired', that is, people from the north).

In time, incursions by the Golden Horde from the East led to the collapse of Kiev, but not of Orthodox civilisation. This migrated north, to become 'Muscovy', the centre of an empire which was still expanding up to the end of the Second World War, when the final frontiers of the Soviet Union were established, embracing not only Russia, including Siberia, and Ukraine, but thirteen other 'Soviet Socialist Republics' as well. Historically and in a very real sense, Russia and Ukraine were – and are – one, despite Ukraine's seizure of independence for a brief period after 1917.

But there is another, very different, story to be told. Soviet, Moscow-based, communism betrayed its trust and treated Ukraine as a vassal state. The worst time was in the 1930s, when Stalin collectivised agriculture, forcing the productive

Ukrainian peasants to provide grain from their rich 'black earth' regions to feed Russia, where longer frozen winters predominated. The resultant famine killed literally millions and it is even reckoned that more Ukrainians died as a result than Jews in the Holocaust. Ukrainian trust in the Kremlin took a blow from which it would never fully recover.

During the Second World War there was a dramatic change. The Nazis drove hard into Ukraine and even captured Kiev. When the Red Army eventually repulsed them, a new Ukrainian frontier was established far to the west. The Soviet Union now incorporated a great swathe of what had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then Poland (after 1918). This was the region around Lviv (or Lvov, as the Russians call it). Before annexation, this area, curiously, had become the breeding-ground for a new Ukrainian nationalism. Its people spoke Ukrainian (as opposed to Russian, which predominated even in Kiev). They were also fiercely religious and loyal to the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic (formerly called 'Uniate') Church.

The history of this Eastern-Rite branch of the Catholic Church is far too complicated to describe here, but the outcome of a troubled history was that these people practised Catholicism with what we may call an Eastern or Orthodox accent. Their liturgy was in Slavonic, they had married clergy (but celibate bishops), but they counted themselves among the Vatican's most loyal subjects.

Now came Stalin's second move against the Ukrainian people. He feared both the religion and the Ukrainian nationalism rampant in the west. Reckoning that he could exploit religion to divert their loyalty to the Kremlin, he abolished the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (with the connivance of the Moscow Patriarchate) and forced believers to convert, literally at gun point, to Russian Orthodoxy. All the bishops and most of the clergy objected, but faced prison and – in many instances – death. Pro-Russian clergy replaced them and the region became, by force, a satellite of the Moscow Patriarchate.

The suppressed Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church became, in secret, the guardian of Ukrainian nationalism. In the 1970s and especially after the accession of Mikhail Gorbachev Catholicism began to emerge from the shadows. Clandestinely, I

met some of its leaders in 1988. They were utterly fearless and uncompromising in their demands, not only for resurrection of their persecuted church, but also for independence from the Kremlin which had betrayed them. They also made common cause with a growing number of Ukrainian intellectuals in Kiev and elsewhere who wanted, culturally, to reinstate a language which had also been treated as second class by Moscow.

There are not many Catholics in the east, but there are many Orthodox in the west. The Odessa region and the Crimea on the Black Sea are more “Russian” than Ukrainian, but that is far from meaning that they all support the Yanukovich platform. Far from Moscow as they are, they are coming increasingly to see – like the large Russian minority in the Baltic States – that independence can suit them economically, rather than being tied to Putin’s expansionist policies.

There is no ‘Orthodox Church in Ukraine’ to enjoin its faithful to cast a pro-Moscow vote. The Church is in triple schism: the largest segment comes under the Moscow Patriarchate, but there is a significant pro-Ukrainian ‘Kiev Patriarchate’ (with its own separate and complicated history) and an ‘Autocephalous Orthodox Church’, annihilated by Stalin at the take-over in the 1920s. Throw into this melting-pot the largest number of Protestants (mainly Baptists) existing anywhere on former Soviet territory and the Muslim Crimean Tatars, trying to reclaim their historic lands after nearly a century of persecution, and one sees a picture so complicated as to defy resolution. Probably, the balance of religious opinion wants Ukraine to solve its own problems without Russian interference.

The Moscow Patriarchate, in retreat, nevertheless continued to dominate the majority of the churches in the Russian-speaking areas of Central (around Kiev) and Eastern Ukraine. However, a strong minority established a schismatic jurisdiction, the Kiev Patriarchate, which supported Ukrainian independence. Yet a third jurisdiction came into being, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which traced its origins back to the brief years after 1917 when Ukraine was an independent state and which was liquidated after the imposition of Soviet control. These churches offered mostly tacit support for Yushchenko.

However, on November 20, the day before the rigged election, the head of the Moscow jurisdiction, Metropolitan Volodymyr, perhaps recoiling from President Putin's blatant interference in the process, seemed to feel a chill wind. He called on both candidates to "stand together against those who want to sow discord" and quoted the words of the great poet Taras Shevchenko, "Love your Ukraine and pray for it." Opposition voices within the Moscow jurisdiction then became stronger. In early December three priests and a group of laymen circulated an open letter in which they called on President Kuchma and Yanukovich to resign.

After the falsified election, events in church circles were now moving as fast as in the political sphere. Amid the turmoil, Cardinal Lubomyr Husar, head of the Greek-Catholic Church, pointed out on December 5 that "the root of the crisis remains an immoral regime which has deprived the Ukrainian people of their legitimate rights and dignity", but ten days later his synod of bishops issued a statesman-like call to their clergy "not to take part in election campaigning and not to limit the rights of the faithful".

There was one remarkable ecumenical Christian intervention from outside. Anticipating, as it were, the visit of President Saakashvili of Georgia to congratulate Yushchenko on 31 December, a group of three clergymen from Tbilisi occupied the rostrum on Independence Square earlier in the month and addressed a rally. By now Ukrainian TV was carrying the full story of the demonstrations, so the sight of these three carried a strong message. The story behind the visit of two Georgian Orthodox clerics, Frs Basil Kobakhidze and Zaza Tevzadze, unofficially led by the head of the Georgian Baptist Church, Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, is worth an article in itself. Suffice it to say that these men had been prominent in the movement for democracy in Georgia a year earlier and that Bishop Malkhaz had several times suffered physical assault from fanatical elements in the Orthodox Church.

Absent from the reports about activities on Independence Square is any account of the significant relief work and nurture of demonstrators which the various Protestant churches (strong in Ukraine) carried out in two tents. They called on demonstrators not to fuel their protests with vodka. This had an effect on some of the

Yanukovych supporters brought from Donetsk for whom strong drink was on tap. Apparently, some listened to the message, even its Christian content. The three most senior Protestant leaders (of different churches) co-signed a statement on December 2 condemning the falsification of the recent election results. They were joined by Cardinal Husar and Patriarch Filaret, head of the Kiev Patriarchate, in an unprecedented ecumenical gesture. Protestant leaders also offered prayers from the platform on December 5.

The Moscow Patriarchate, like Putin himself, has lost an immense amount of face. Patriarch Alexi II in Moscow issued a defensive statement last week in which he said, “I expect the new President of Ukraine will have enough wisdom to go the way of unity and not confrontation” – which is being interpreted in Kiev as both directive and patronising. Authoritarianism has taken a sharp blow, while independent Christian voices have shown themselves both moderate and effective, raising their stock in Ukrainian society.

***ELECTIONS IN UKRAINE: A MESSAGE FROM THE LEADERS OF THE  
CHRISTIAN CHURCHES OF UKRAINE [December 2, 2004]***

Dear Brothers and Sisters! Respected fellow citizens!

Having received the preliminary results of the presidential election of Ukraine through the mass media, which [i.e. preliminary election results] have elicited mass acts of protest unprecedented in our country, with the participation of hundreds of thousands of our countrymen, a significant number of whom are young, which is especially evident in Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, we consider it our pastoral and civic responsibility to state the following.

The Church has always been with the people, both in times of joy and in times of testing. Therefore, at this time, when Ukraine is standing before the choice concerning its future - democratic or authoritarian - when unity and even the independence of our native land are threatened, the Church is with the people.

We, as leaders of Christian churches of Ukraine and as citizens of our native land, are concerned by the unjust way the election campaign [has gone] and especially by the massive falsification of the results.

The Church is called to witness to the truth, to preach love and peace, and that means that [the Church] cannot agree with untruth.

Therefore, first of all, we appeal to believers to fast and pray for peace in our country and for the realization of correct [just, fair] results in the presidential election.

We call our congregations and all the Ukrainian people to stand up for the truth, preserve unity and civic peace, hold to the constitution and laws of Ukraine, and not give way to violence.

We appeal to the authorities, especially to those that answer for the true realization of the people's will, and also to the higher and local courts, with a call to remember their responsibility before God in order that they may fulfill the responsibilities placed on them by the people of Ukraine.

We are convinced that the people of Ukraine will wisely and honorably endure the present time of testing. Truth is undefeatable! We ask for God's blessing on all our fellow citizens.

*Filaret, Patriarch of Kiev and all Rus-Ukraine [Kiev Patriarchate]*

*Lyubomir, Supreme Archbishop, Ukraine Greko-Catholic Church*

*Mikhail Panochko, Bishop, Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith of Ukraine [Pentecostal,]*

*Markirian Trofimiak, Deputy Chair of Conference of Roman Catholic Bishops in Ukraine*

*Leonid Padun, Senior Bishop, Ukrainian Christian Evangelical Church*

*Viacheslav Gorpinchuk, Bishop, Ukrainian Lutheran Church*